

Many Refugees Neutral About Vietcong *Fsu: Phoenix*

Survey of Attitudes Is Made by Americans

By GLORIA EMERSON

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SAIGON, South Vietnam, Oct. 25 — An official American survey of attitudes among refugees has found that many take a neutral view of the Vietcong and that they consider living conditions under Communist control to be reasonably good.

The 181 refugees interrogated, from a group believed to number almost 80,000, are from the U Minh Forest, where a campaign to clear out enemy concentrations has been under way since December, 1970. The Government puts the number of refugees at 45,000.

Government assistance is considered inadequate by some of the refugees interviewed, according to the survey. The death and destruction caused by frequent military activities by allied forces — which means troop movements, artillery strikes and bombing — were major reasons why many had fled their homes.

The report on the findings points up the complexities of dealing with the refugee problem despite the long-established apparatus and the benefits ostensibly provided.

Long a Vietcong Base

The U Minh area, long a base for the Vietcong guerrillas of South Vietnam, is at the southern tip of the peninsula in three provinces. It is a complex of dense jungles, open cultivated land, winding streams and straight canals.

The survey and report were done for the Pacification Studies Group, which is attached to Civil Operations and Rural Development Support, the American agency that conceived of the pacification programs and supervises them.

Marked "For Official Use Only," the study is in an idiom meant for United States officials. A summary says:

"Living conditions of the people in the past while under VC control were considered reasonably good. Few of the refugees considered themselves to have been living in want. The people's attitudes toward the VC while under their control were largely neutral, while feelings about their future reception in GVN [Government of (South) Vietnam]

were basically hopeful. Government assistance has been provided to over a third of those interviewed, but it has been invariably late and usually considered inadequate. Their attitude toward the GVN has been generally favorable although they do not credit GVN with doing much for them beyond providing security."

'No Sense of Urgency'

On the question of initial Government assistance to the refugees, the report says: "As in the past, no sense of urgency was felt by the Government."

"Due to the high mobility of the refugees, a 'Let-the-dust-settle-first' attitude aptly describes the initial feelings of many officials about future assistance," it continues. "Lack of sufficient social-action cadre and the generally slow procedures of the services complemented this attitude."

In Thoibinh District in Anxuyen Province, for example, 20 per cent of the beneficiaries failed to show the first time for payments of a 30-day rice allowance, the report notes, explaining that there were "numerous problems": failure to register the refugees, compiled the necessary official documents and notify the refugees when and where to appear.

"Many of these refugees were out working to support themselves," the report says.

When the second payment session arrived, after ample notification, the report says, "many of the refugees who show the first time went away disappointed — someone else had gotten their payments."

While the report says that life under Vietcong control in the U Minh area was difficult for a majority of the refugees interviewed, "a surprising number, 37 per cent, considered it to be good or better."

The area was a major stronghold of the Vietminh, who fought the French. From 1940 to 1954, under Vietminh control, living standards rose to a level where the people could be termed well off, the report says. From 1954 to 1966 the area was a major training and supply center for the Vietcong.

Long exposure to one form or another of Communist control did not seem to worry the people as long as they were able to make a living. As for the future, two-thirds of them worry over their ability to earn a living, while concern about security is found only among half this number, the report says, adding that 93 per cent

U.S. Advisers Voicing Doubts on Saigon's Desire to Push Operation Phoenix

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SAIGON, South Vietnam, Oct. 25 — Many American advisers in the provinces are voicing doubt about the willingness of Vietnamese officials to carry out the controversial program known as Operation Phoenix, whose purpose is to weed out Vietcong political leaders.

"In this province the Government will not allocate even a pencil, paperclip or piece of paper on a regular basis to the program," according to Russell L. Meerdink, senior American adviser in Phu yen, on the central coast.

"It would seem that the problem is common," he said in a confidential report on pacification in Military Region II, a coastal and highland area north of Saigon.

"The low quality of personnel assigned to the program must also be considered something other than 'coincidental,'" he added.

Who Is Being Fooled?

He said it was the prerogative of the Government in Saigon to withhold support from the Phoenix Program, but, he added, "certainly the United States Government should not give the Government of South Vietnam the satisfaction of thinking it is 'fooling' the Americans."

The Phoenix Program, conceived by the Central Intelligence Agency in 1967, was turned over to the South Vietnamese in principle the following year. Americans have since pushed the program, providing advisers and funds as a primary means of seeking out the Vietcong.

Since South Vietnam has not given the program the emphasis some American officials feel it should have, they are considering a reorganization of it program and its basic concepts in the hopes of salvaging it.

Lack of interest in or disinterest for the program is not limited to Vietnamese in Military Region II.

Lag Traced to Saigon

"There seems to be a decrease in the interest and emphasis in the program," wrote the senior American advisor in Quangnam Province, which is in the northernmost military region of South Vietnam. He traced the declining interest to Saigon, where the failure to

stress the program's importance has resulted in the removal of many Vietnamese once vitally involved in it. Men trained exclusively for the program are being removed without replacement, the report on Quangnam said.

The senior province official in Baclieu Province, on the southern coast, reported that the Phoenix program was effective against low-level Vietcong but "ineffective against the 'hard core' of the leadership."

Experimental Rewards

Last August, in an attempt to bolster the program, the United States and the South Vietnamese Government decided to begin experimental cash rewards in four provinces, paying up to the equivalent of \$11,000 for certain key leaders. It is doubtful that the rewards are effective.

Last May the senior American adviser in Biuhtuy Province, 75 miles west of Saigon, said the primary reason for the lack of success was "the inherent distaste" of people for inducing relatives, friends of people with political connections.

Quota for Each Province

Under the Phoenix operating plan, each province receives a quota of Vietcong to be "neutralized" each month, which can mean arresting a man, taking him into the Open Arms program, which accepts defectors, or killing him.

The quota system led to criticisms here and in Congressional hearings in Washington.

"Volume rather than quality neutralization" became the pattern, a senior adviser wrote. "A senior adviser wrote, discussing the quotas. "Much of this can be attributed to U.S. guidance and influence and quotas," he added.

Testimony in Washington disclosed that American aid to the program from 1968 to May 1971, amounted to \$732-million. Current contributions have not been disclosed.